



## Californians Are Willing to Pay for Cleaner Air

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Automakers take note: a majority of Californians are considering buying a hybrid or electric car as their next vehicle. It's not the alluring sleekness of the Toyota Prius driving people to consider spending premium rates on fuel-efficient vehicles; Californians are choosing what will both save money in the long run and be better for the environment.

A poll released Thursday suggests Californians are not always seduced by bargains. Many are willing to pay more for environmentally positive goods and practices across the board.

"People believe that we need to do more, even if it costs more," says Mark Baldassare, president and CEO of the Public Policy Institute of California, which conducted the poll.

Baldassare says the findings point to a sense of urgency that "we didn't see a few years ago."

The poll, sponsored by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, surveyed 2,500 California adult residents in English, Spanish, Chinese (Mandarin or Cantonese), Vietnamese and Korean.

Six out of 10 Latinos and whites said they'll consider buying a hybrid or electric as their next car, and more than half of African Americans and Asians agree. Latinos surveyed report the highest financial hardship caused by high gas prices (83 percent), though one in three carpool or take public transit. All respondents assert they've felt the strain of high gas prices (67 percent blacks, 65 percent Asians and 54 percent whites).

### Hot air in state politics

In his crusade to promote better environmental practices Governor Schwarzenegger has created incentives for businesses and homeowners to install solar panels. He hopes to reduce energy consumption through a regional agreement with Western states to create a "cap and trade" system that allows companies to reduce their emissions and sell credits to companies with high emissions. He's even overhauled his '65 Chevy Impala's 800-horsepower engine to run on bio-diesel.

Despite his "green" image, according to the poll, fewer than half (47 percent) of Californians approve of the job Schwarzenegger is doing to protect the environment, a drop since January when his approval was 55 percent.

And most Californians are counting on their local government for environmental measures. Thirty seven percent of residents and 42 percent of likely voters believe state governments, not the federal government, should manage air quality and other environmental regulations.

Perhaps that is in reaction to the White House. Respondents were very critical of President Bush's environmental policies. Disapproval ratings went as high as 80 percent among African Americans, 65 percent among whites, 57 percent among Latinos and 56 percent among Asians.

Baldassare says they don't believe governments are doing enough to support clean air, drought management and climate change prevention, and this is what makes Californians willing to spend more.

### **Poor health in ethnic neighborhoods**

The health of many ethnic communities is at risk due to pollution. Poll results show Latinos, African Americans and Asians are far more likely than whites to believe air quality is worse in lower-income areas. That belief is held most strongly by respondents with lower incomes. In the San Joaquin Valley, 58 percent of Latinos believe this to be true, versus only 19 percent of whites.

Their suspicion is true, but it's not because they are less well off. A landmark study by the United Church of Christ first conducted in 1987 and again in 2007 looked at the environmental health of ethnic communities. It found that regardless of socio-economic status, these neighborhoods are host to a disproportionate number of toxic facilities when compared to white neighborhoods. People living in neighborhoods within two miles of commercial hazardous waste facilities are usually (56 percent) people of color -- nearly double the percentage whom live beyond these areas.

A healthy environment shouldn't have to cost more, says Michael Gelobter, president of the nonprofit think-tank Redefining Progress. He says the main challenge of the environmental justice movement is to bring environmental inequities to light.

"People are already paying a lot for the system we have today," he says, but a system that promotes cleaner air and energy efficiency "is a world in which [peoples'] energy bills are lower."

### **It's in the air**

When asked what they felt was the biggest environmental problem facing the state, Californians cited global warming and water scarcity. This is the first time a majority (54 percent) believe global warming poses a "very serious threat to the state's future economy and quality of life."

Californians have consistently listed air quality as their greatest environmental concern in the seven years the PPIC has polled on the environment. And this has traditionally been the number one concern for Californians of color, especially among those living in the Central Valley, Inland Empire and Los Angeles areas. More than half of African Americans polled said a family member suffers from asthma or other respiratory problems.

No wonder Californians worry about air quality, the state has the two regions in the country with the worst air quality - Los Angeles and the San Joaquin Valley. Annette Kondo, spokesperson with the Coalition for Clean Air, emphasizes that, "air pollution is a statewide issue."

Nearly half of Californians responded -- correctly -- that vehicle emissions contribute the most to regional air pollution, according to the poll. Not all those polluting vehicles are cars. A huge majority (71 percent) favor a fee for cargo ships which would pay to replace or retrofit high-polluting trucks working in the ports.

The proposed port investment bill (SB974) would do just this. Under it, the port would collect \$30 from every container there. Half of that money would go to reducing air pollution and half to reduce the surrounding traffic congestion, which adds significantly to the air pollution.

After all, as Kondo says, "each day a ship is anchored in the port, it "puts one ton of toxic and smog pollutants into the air."

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